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How Weak Is the CIA?

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In March-April 1976, almost an entire issue of this magazine was devoted to a broad consideration of the ongoing controversy over the role of intelligence agencies in a free society. Investigations of irregularities in American domestic and foreign intelligence operations had revealed considerable evidence of official abuse of authority, illegal activities, and improper use of intelligence services. At that time, we concluded that regulatory reforms, as well as some form of continuing, efficient monitoring of the intelligence complex, were essential, not only to insure the national welfare, but to protect the civil rights of Americans. Papers by five scholars and experts published in that issue explored how respect for the law might be reconciled with the concurrent need for intelligence secrecy. Included were proposals for monitoring systems and reform by Senator Margaret Chase Smith, and former NSA intelligence research analyst, Dr. W. Thomas Nichols.

As the intelligence controversy continues, we here present another, now burgeoning aspect of the problem: Has the reform of our intelligence services, and the measures by which we have sought to implement the "right to know," in fact destroyed the effectiveness of U.S. intelligence operations, to the point where the national safety is at serious risk?

I once wrote a "spoof" article which was published in the Washington *Star* under the headline: "NOW THEY WANT IT TO BE TOLD: The CIA, It Turns Out, Is a Front for SUBMAG."

My revelation purported to be based on "a bulky work about a phase of American intelligence activity which I am certain few people know anything about." What I provided was an "introduction" to this "bulky work" in which I "disclosed" that behind a Central Intelligence Agency which was continually being attacked was the real intelligence agency, SUBMAG, an acronym for "submerged agency." The CIA's *raison d'être* was to have its activities exposed and debated while SUBMAG, unobtrusively, did the real work of intelligence. Its existence was to be known only by three persons—the president, SUBMAG's director of operations, and the author of the introduction, "a middle-echelon New York State political leader."

The then editor of the Washington *Star*, Jim Bellows, thought the article was hilarious, and in dead-pan fashion put it on the front page of the Sunday editorial section on February 16, 1975. On the same day the story ran, I was telephoned by a prominent Washington journalist specializing in intelligence matters. (For obvious reasons, he shall be nameless.) He congratulated me on my "scoop." Since my story referred to "unpublished appendices and the report of a committee," his news organization, he said, was prepared to purchase the appendices and the report.

Thinking he was pulling my leg, I replied with mock stuffiness that they were not for sale. He snapped that money was no object. Suddenly I realized that my journalist friend thought the "scoop" was true. I blurted out that the report, the appendices, everything was a big joke. There was a second's silence, and then:

"My God, I just put a story about SUBMAG on the wire! Wait a minute—!"

He returned in a few moments to the phone. He had tried to kill it, but the story had gone out already. He said to me:

"The damn thing made so much sense, we all believed it."

And, of course, it *did* make "sense." For eight years, the CIA had been exposed in newspapers and magazines—1975 has been dubbed the Year of Revelations—although the really big exposés came later when the White House and congressional investigations began. Was it conceivable, a KGB executive might well ask,[1] that a superpower like the United States would so hamstring itself that its secret intelligence work—covert action, clandestine collection of information, counterintelligence—would be paralyzed?

The problem with writing and thinking about intelligence in an open, democratic society is that everything in this nether world, this world of non-secret secrecy, is plausible. Anything you want to say about intelligence activity and its practitioners is "true." The more improbable, the more probable. The accusation is the verdict. Denial is really affirmation, affirmation equals suspicion, suspicion equals indictment, and indictment raises the unanswerable question:

Are secret intelligence agencies and their activities compatible with democratic values and aspirations?

The late Jean Monnet had an answer. He once told James Reston that "a democratic country as open as America can never really run a secret service and, if it tries to do so, in the end probably its losses are really greater than its gains."

Some might agree with Monnet; others might agree with Professor Sidney Hook who, in arguing for the necessity of strategic intelligence, said: "Every situation of moral choice is one in which the choice is not between good and bad, right or wrong, but between good and good, right and right, the good and the right. One good may be overridden by a greater good; one obligation by a more pressing one."

Planning for the future

Some months ago I was in Washington at a colloquium on "intelligence requirements for the 1980s," arranged by the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence and consisting of a group of academics—law professors, international relations professors, historians—who have decided to act on the belief that intelligence is too important to be left in the hands of a much beleaguered intelligence establishment.[2] Participants in the colloquium also included formerly high-ranking CIA and Federal Bureau of Investigation executives, senior staff members of the Senate and House Committees on Intelligence, and staff assistants of several senators.

The meeting in part reflected a growing disquiet in Washington, particularly on Capitol Hill, that the entire intelligence controversy perhaps had gone too far, and that the time had come to re-examine the significance of past reforms and those proposed in Senate Bill 2525, comprising a new charter for the intelligence agencies. The colloquium also arose out of a concern that, while the congressional